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SUBJECT: FILIPINO ENVOY MAKES LOW-KEY VISIT TO BURMA

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: Filipino Foreign Secretary Albert made her debut visit to Burma February 18-19 to get to know her Burmese counterpart and to resurrect a moribund Burma-Philippines Joint Commission. Her public remarks were laudatory of regime road map efforts. However, she did not meet with the Head of State, and the SPDC, which may view the Philippines as close to the U.S., gave the visit perfunctory treatment. This was yet another missed opportunity by an ASEAN country to encourage the SPDC to make progress on a political dialogue. End Summary.

2. (U) Philippines Foreign Affairs Secretary Delia Domingo Albert, at the tail end of a swing through several mainland ASEAN countries, visited Rangoon February 18-19. During her 24-hour visit Secretary Albert met Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt and Foreign Minister U Win Aung. Albert will return to Rangoon in April to participate in a meeting of the Burma-Philippines Joint Commission that will address cooperation in human resources development, trade, and agriculture.

3. (C) The Philippines Ambassador to Burma, Phoebe Gomez, told the COM on Feb. 25 that a primary objective of the visit was for Albert to "get comfortable" with her Burmese counterpart, U Win Aung, prior to a March ASEAN retreat in Hanoi. Gomez said she encouraged the visit as a way to kick start the Joint Commission, which was set up in 1997 during a visit of President Ramos but to date has not convened. Ambassador Gomez also allowed that she had pushed hard for this visit as she "needed to do something" in Burma, observing that other ASEAN countries, especially Thailand, were "very active here."

4. (C) Ambassador Gomez said that the GOP needs to establish "one to one" channels of communication with the Burmese, claiming that her government faced difficulties here because the Philippines is treated differently from the other ASEAN countries due to a close relationship with the United States. The Ambassador said she did not press for a meeting between her Secretary and SPDC Chairman Than Shwe. Gomez intimated to COM that she was afraid that a meeting might not be granted because of the perceived relationship with the U.S. or because the Burmese may be waiting for May Filipino presidential elections to see what the outcome could mean for the Philippines-Burma bilateral relationship.

5. (U) According to the government-controlled "Myanmar Times," in a February 19 interview Secretary Albert said that the Philippines supports the SPDC's road map for democracy. The newspaper quoted the Foreign Secretary as saying "Both bilaterally and regionally we are good partners... in ASEAN we help each other to ensure that the vision of (a leader of a member state) could be implemented." Ambassador Gomez said the remarks attributed to Albert were accurate, but the Filipino DCM told us separately that the quote was not exactly in line with the Philippines statement issued after the Bali ASEAN summit last October.

Comment: What Ally?

6. (C) We view this visit as another missed opportunity by a key ASEAN country to encourage the SPDC to make progress on a political dialogue with the democratic opposition. Part of the problem may be Ambassador Gomez. She has always been a little too close for comfort to the regime, hanging with the generals' wives and at times appearing to be significantly out of line with Manila's Burma policy. Gomez avoids the opposition groups like the plague and has never tried to meet with ASSK, even when other ASEAN ambassadors paid ASSK a courtesy call in May 2002. She told us previously that she did not like late Foreign Secretary Ople's critical stance on Burma, which made life "uncomfortable" for her in Rangoon. End Comment.
Martinez